

# Policies and Procedures to Avoid Driver Fatigue

By Matthew Barnett

**Y**ou've seen the headlines: A crash on the highway, a big-rig on its side, or a car in a ditch. Some of those drivers may have been distracted, some may have encountered poor weather conditions, and possibly...some of them didn't get enough sleep.

Human error and weather, while unfortunate, will happen, but what about driver fatigue? The Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) defines fatigue as "the result of physical or mental exertion that impairs performance." It sounds simple, but addressing it isn't, because there are many possible causes for fatigue. Driver fatigue is usually attributed to lack of sleep, stress, long work hours, strenuous work or non-work activities, and any combination of other factors in a wide spectrum of issues that affect alertness.

The Transit Cooperative Research Program (TCRP) Report 81, *Toolbox for Transit Operator Fatigue*, dedicates a chapter to understanding fatigue. The nature of sleep, sleep disorders, health, nutrition, lifestyle, drugs and alertness, work schedules and performance are all pieces to the complex puzzle of human fatigue. As a manager of an agency, it's important to understand these complexities and how to work around with them, or it could mean more than just a fender-bender; it could mean serious injuries or fatalities.

In fact, a recent American Public Transportation Association (APTA) survey found that 20 percent of participating transit agencies identified fatigue experienced by their drivers as a contributing factor to on-road accidents. The same survey found that most transit agencies don't consider fatigue while conducting accident and injury investigations, so it may be that



*Transit managers should know and understand what causes fatigue and adopt policies to keep it at bay.*

the statistics are higher than what the survey showed.

## The anatomy of fatigue

The FMCSA found that alertness is related to time of day more so than "time-on-task." Your body is naturally drowsy between the hours of midnight to 6:00 AM and also 2:00 to 4:00 PM. It may not be possible to avoid driving during these hours for some of your employees, but they should be getting adequate amounts of sleep each night to help avoid drowsiness during these times. The FMCSA recommends that drivers stick to a consistent wake/sleep cycle (circadian rhythm) during the week to maintain a pattern of alertness in the human body. [The FMCSA does not have any data supporting that crashes were happening more in the time periods mentioned above, nor did they have a recommendation for how long to sleep or when to sleep.]

Other tips mentioned in the study for avoiding fatigue include maintaining a healthy diet, taking naps, avoiding alcohol, avoiding medications that cause drowsiness, and being able to recognize the signs of fatigue: frequent yawning,

heavy eyes, and blurred vision.

The FMCSA does not recommend using "alertness tricks" to keep drivers awake: smoking, turning up the radio, drinking coffee or any other caffeinated drinks, and opening the window. Nothing is a substitute for sleep.

## Policies and procedures

It's up to your agency to provide effective policies and procedures for drowsy drivers. You may need to do some digging to find the right procedures for your agency. The TCRP Report

81, mentioned above, has information on myriad aspects of drowsy driving and how to manage it. Here are some tips from that report to help you get the wheels rolling.

### 1. Establish fatigue awareness.

Placing posters in driver areas, maintaining an open door policy, and discussing questions are all great ways to raise awareness in your agency. Posters can be found in Appendix E of the TCRP Report.

### 2. Learn how to detect fatigue.

A supervisor who sees operators daily will best be able to notice any signs of fatigue. You may ask these types of questions: How much sleep did you get last night? How much sleep did you get in the last three days? How many hours have you worked in the past week? When was the last time you had a day off?

### 3. Make a policy that covers both acute fatigue and chronic fatigue.

Handling situations for acute fatigue should be different than situations dealing with chronic fatigue. If an employee exhibits sudden onset of physical and mental exhaustion or

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mental weariness, it is acute fatigue. If the employee exhibits constant physical and mental exhaustion or mental weariness, it is chronic fatigue.

**4. Train your supervisors to coach a fatigued employee.** Coaching an operator on a chronic fatigue problem will help them approach the situation and act responsibly. A 10-step outline with sample comments is in the TCRP Report 81.

**5. Implement more rest breaks.** 10 to 15 minute complete breaks from work consist of the driver being relieved from operating a vehicle and leaving the vehicle. Research shows that breaks help counter fatigue and sustain vigilance.

**6. Give the drivers work variety.** Try assigning different routes over the course of the day. Some service plans are more fatiguing than others.

### For more information

There are plenty of resources out there to help you and your agency build policies and procedures that will help combat driver fatigue. Consider getting a group of employees together to help you in selecting appropriate measures for your agency. The TCRP Report 81 recommends getting everyone involved, including drivers, supervisors and managers. You can find the TCRP Report 81 *Toolbox for Transit Operator Fatigue* on the Transportation Research Board's website; see link in the sources section below.

*Most transit agencies don't consider fatigue while conducting accident and injury investigations, according to an APTA survey, so fatigue may be more of a factor in crashes than is reported.*

A great article written specifically for drivers is "Fatigue and the Transit Driver," by Pat Weaver. It can be found in the *Kansas TransReporter* archive at <http://www.ksrtap.org> under the Newsletters link on the left side of the page. Use the search feature to search for the article's title.

Taking measures to avoid fatigue in your agency will help prevent costly crashes and possible fatalities. Remember, everyone needs to nap now and then—just not on the road. ●

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